

The University of Southern Mississippi

## The Aquila Digital Community

---

Honors Theses

Honors College

---

Spring 5-11-2012

### "I Have Something to Say, If People Only Would Hear It": The Voiceless Artist and the Idea of Reform in the Work of Rebecca Harding Davis

Kathryn Plunkett

*University of Southern Mississippi*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://aquila.usm.edu/honors\\_theses](https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses)

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Plunkett, Kathryn, "I Have Something to Say, If People Only Would Hear It": The Voiceless Artist and the Idea of Reform in the Work of Rebecca Harding Davis" (2012). *Honors Theses*. 53.  
[https://aquila.usm.edu/honors\\_theses/53](https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses/53)

This Honors College Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact [Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu](mailto:Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu).

The University of Southern Mississippi

“I Have Something to Say, If People Only Would Hear It”: The Voiceless Artist and the  
Idea of Reform in the Work of Rebecca Harding Davis

by

Kathryn Plunkett

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of English

May 2012



Approved by

---

Dr. Ellen Weinauer  
Associate Professor of English

---

Dr. Eric Tribunella  
English Department chair

---

David R. Davies, Dean  
Honors College



## Table of Contents

Part 1: Introduction	1
Part 2: Davis in Historical Context	4
Part 3: Capitalism and the Failure of Voice in “Life in the Iron Mills”	12
Part 4. The Ideology of “True Womanhood” and Its Limitation on the Female Artist in “The Promise of Dawn”	22
Part 5: Using Artistic Voice to Critique the Patriarchal Male Editor-Female Writer Relationship in “Marcia”	31
Part 6: Davis’s Use of the Voiceless Artist to Assert Her Own Literary Voice	38
Works Cited	41



## Part 1: Introduction

In her 1904 memoir, *Bits of Gossip*, American journalist and fiction writer Rebecca Harding Davis wrote that “nobody has sketched those uneasy, unsuccessful ghosts who haunt the gates and hedges of the scribbling world; always outside, yet always hoping to enter in” (142). In this remark, Davis reveals her desire to write about ordinary people in ordinary situations and to give her writings a sense of realism that had not been portrayed by the idealistic Romantic writers that preceded her. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, American writers had emphasized emotion and imagination over reason, allowing them to ideally and heroically portray their characters in unlikely situations (“American Novel”). However, mindful of a number of urgent social conditions, which included issues of race and abolition, the Civil War, Reconstruction, women’s changing role in society, temperance, imperialism, and the harms of industrialization, Davis saw a need to write in a new manner in order to portray the problems of the time period and encourage reform (“Society”).

Although Davis focused her writings on ordinary people, she herself lived a lifestyle different from that of most nineteenth century white American women. Davis was born June 24, 1831, grew up in Huntsville, Alabama, and then moved to Wheeling, West Virginia in 1837. She attended Washington Female Seminary in Pennsylvania, where she graduated valedictorian of her class. In 1850 she began her career as a journalist for the *Wheeling Intelligencer*. Her first work of fiction, “Life in the Iron Mills,” which realistically portrayed the plight of immigrant factory workers, was published anonymously in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1861. After this breakout debut, Davis went on to write ten novels, sixteen books serialized in magazines, hundreds of short



stories, essays, stories for children, and a memoir. Although she was a contemporary of Romantic writers such as Bronson and Louisa May Alcott, Washington Irving, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Davis continued to write more realistic depictions of subjects and situations (“Society”). In fact, she can be seen as a pioneer for the literary movement of realism, a genre that attempts to faithfully portray reality by using plausible plot events, thorough detail, and common characters. Furthermore, by often allowing her characters to be governed by scientific laws and forces of nature instead of their own free will, Davis showed characteristics of naturalism thirty years before it became a literary movement among American writers (“Literary Movements”). Davis’s works also allowed her to participate in the many reform movements that aimed to gradually transform the existing structure of nineteenth century America. For example, her novella *Put Out of the Way* (1870), which depicted the mistreatment of people with mental illnesses, encouraged a revision of Pennsylvania laws. She even joined forces with her husband Clarke Davis, writing pieces which depicted the corruption of asylums and the state’s inability to protect the mentally ill within the asylums. Besides working to reform institutions for the mentally ill, she also wrote about various other issues, such as prison reform and the improvement of the education system. Her piece “The Curse of Education” was used in a congressional report in 1899 to support the idea of including education as a part of prison reform. In these ways, Davis’s writings, whether fiction or non-fiction, were aimed at directly engaging and improving the society in which she lived (Long 272).

With the mindset of writing to improve society, Davis consciously chose to “sketch the unsuccessful ghosts” that haunted the realms of literature. Rather than tell the

stories of characters that would have been familiar to her readers, Davis focused on working- and middle-class Americans who were easily forgotten within society and hardly ever the focus of fictional writing. Although these characters were ordinary in status, Davis portrayed many as having unique talents and abilities, especially with regard to the arts. Davis's focus on artist figures was not uncommon during the time period. They were often used by Romantic writers such as Emerson, Hawthorne, and Irving, which would seem to imply that Davis's focus on them was not anything new and groundbreaking, but rather a continuation of what other writers were doing during the time period. However, Davis tells a different story than those of her Romantic predecessors and contemporaries. Rather than representing the artist as a heroic, self-reliant man with the power and ability to create beautiful art, Davis recasts these working-class figures as oppressed citizens who are unable to use their talent to break free from their surroundings. The artistic talent that should bring greater self-expression and freedom must be compromised or given up completely. With these tragic endings, Davis allows for a critique of the society that hinders the artistic expression of her ordinary and oppressed characters. The objective of this research project is to explore how Davis's refashioning of the artist figure and their tragic fate within her stories enable her to encourage social reform and establish her own literary voice in an unprecedented and unexpected way.

Apart from the critical attention given to "Life in the Iron Mills," Davis has been largely overlooked by literary critics. I hope to fill in some of the gaps of present day literary scholarship by bringing attention to Davis's treatment of a classic theme, examining some of her lesser-known work, and bringing to light Davis's belief in art as a

means of social reform. That belief, I would argue, helped to radically change the literary landscape of nineteenth century America. By writing the bleak stories of untraditional characters- artistic individuals who should have the ability to transcend their environment and become self-reliant creators of beautiful art- Davis reveals the plight of the oppressed artist. Her focus on this group, one to which she belongs as a female writer, becomes a literary device enabling her to both assert her own artistic voice and to inspire readers to reform the oppressive institutions and ideologies that defeat the artist.

## **Part 2: Davis in Historical Context**

During the early to mid nineteenth century, the majority of American authors adhered to the standards of the literary movement called “Romanticism.” According to Richard Chase’s explanation of Romantic writings:

[T]he word must signify . . . an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development, and continuity; . . . a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness; a willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man in society, or to consider these things only indirectly or abstractly. (qtd. in Karcher 782)

This definition, derived from Chase’s study of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s writings, shows the ways in which Romantic writers tried to break away from reality in order to write fiction that focused on emotions and imagination over common sense and reason.

Romantic writings admire the individual hero who is able to refute the limitations of society in order to experience freedom and gain a greater understanding of themselves

and their surrounding universe. This self-realization often happened within nature, giving the literary movement a pastoral element (“American Novel”). The power of the individual in breaking free of society and embracing the nature within and around them was often portrayed through the heroic status of the artist. In Hawthorne’s story “The Artist of the Beautiful,” for example, an artist named Owen Warland is portrayed as an outsider who does not partake in male camaraderie with working class people such as blacksmiths. Instead, he becomes obsessive and self-consumed with constructing a mechanical butterfly that appears real. According to Frederick Newberry, Warland’s mechanical butterfly enables both creator and audience “to enter a new realm unrestricted in its possibilities” and full of make-believe and fantasy (83). This creative process is not useful or profitable, but it is nevertheless highly esteemed throughout the text. Although Hawthorne’s later works portrayed a darker side of the artistic process, these works still embodied the idea of art for art’s sake. Furthermore, Emerson and other popular Romantic writers frequently wrote about the miraculous power of the artist to free themselves from their surrounding world, and in doing so perfect the world around them. For this reason, Emerson referred to artists in general, and more specifically poets, as “liberating gods.” Such “liberating” and liberated artists were often the heroes of Romantic literature (Adkins 669).

Emerson is typically understood as the foremost proponent of “transcendentalism,” an intellectual movement and further continuation of Romantic ideals. This movement emphasized the self-reliant man by asserting his ability to perfect himself by relying on his own intuition and to experience unity between himself, nature, and God (“American Novel”). Transcendentalism’s commitment to the empowered

individual greatly influenced the intellectuals of the time period and had a far reaching influence on American literature. According to Paul Gilmore, the idealism led to an aesthetic theory that placed art “beyond the political and social sphere” in order to keep it from engaging in any “religious, moral, economic, and political debates and conflicts” (251). Therefore aesthetics, or the study of the beautiful, should transcend mere personal matters and the physical environment. This separation of the physical and artistic realm is seen in the transcendental journalist Elizabeth Peabody’s definition of the aesthetic element: “a component and indivisible part of all human creations which are not mere works of necessity; in other words, which are based on idea, as distinguished from appetite” (qtd. in Gilmore 252). According to this definition, the artist who breaks free from the obligations of society is able to create something inherently and aesthetically pleasing. This further empowers the individual with the capacity to experience the beauty he creates, which is also inherent within himself and nature. In this way, the perfectibility of man and his ability to break away from society and create something beautiful make him appear god-like with endless capabilities.

By first empowering the individual with the capability to break free from the physical realm and transform himself, writers such as Emerson then portrayed how that transformation could in turn improve society. Instead of losing sight of the societal ills that needed to be reformed during the time period, Emerson critiqued the American institutions that had established a “conspiracy of slavery” in which bosses became thieves for their “stealing of men and setting them to work stealing their labor” (qtd in Gougeon 279). Emerson believed, however, that outward institutional reform could be best achieved through the inward reform of the individual. This idea of individual

transformation and its ability to improve society is best seen in his 1841 lecture “Man, the Reformer” (Koch 160). There, Emerson asks, “What is man born for but to be a Reformer, a Re-maker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating the great Nature which embosoms us all, and which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every hour repairs herself, yielding us every morning a new day, and with every pulsation a new life?” (qtd. in Koch 160). The question shows Emerson’s use of abstract and optimistic language to inspire individuals to rely on their own “Nature” to rise above and remove any impediments. This language demonstrates Emerson’s belief that writers could use words to supply their audience with a framework for understanding and altering themselves with regard to social reality (Gilmore 252). Although some believe there was an inherent “tension between aesthetic withdrawal and social change” in the transcendental philosophy (Gilmore 251), Emerson argues that aesthetic withdrawal improves the individual, thus allowing the individual to improve the society in which he or she lives.

In opposition to transcendental theories concerning aesthetic withdrawal and reform, there emerged a separate genre of literature known as the social novel. Unlike Romantics and transcendentalists, whose ultimate goal was to redefine reality with regard to the self, the authors of this fiction meant to engage reality on moral grounds in order to persuade readers to help reform social institutions. Also unlike romantic writers, who were, for the most part, men, the writers of this morality literature were mostly women. Although not all women were writing social novels, a large majority were successfully doing so. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* sold 300,000 copies during its first year of publication in 1852, with that number reaching over one million by

mid-1853 (Miller). The novel's treatment of slavery brought an issue that needed to be reformed to the attention of the American public, and in doing so helped to mobilize the antislavery movement. Although Stowe is well remembered for her social novel, she was not alone in her undertaking of successfully writing and selling a novel that called for the reform of American society. Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, published two years before Stowe's novel, was considered America's first bestseller. Maria Susanna Cummins' *The Lamplighter* (1854), portraying a young girl's struggle with poverty, reportedly sold 20,000 copies in the first twenty days of its publication (Williams 185). An annual sales report published by *The American Publisher's Circular* in 1863 showed that Cummins' novel had sold 93,000 copies, making it a best seller surpassed only by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the works of Washington Irving (195). These statistics indicate that many works of popular American fiction focused on the social issues that restricted the individual, rather than the individual's ability to transcend those issues as portrayed in Romantic fiction.

With the widespread popularity of these novels, many readers were exposed to a picture of American life that was neither idealized nor unbelievable. The writers of social novels utilized a realistic form of narrative that allowed them to transport "the reader, vicariously, into alien neighborhoods: the tenements, the settlement house, the factories, the union halls, and the revival meetings" (Yeager 448). These stories uncovered areas that had previously been hidden to most readers, inviting a kind of personal experience with such "alien" spaces and the people who inhabit them (449). This experience, and the emotional transformation that it meant to stimulate, would also hopefully lead to action and concrete reform. For many Americans, these stories would be the closest encounters

they had with suffering and injustice, and therefore had the best possibility of encouraging both individual and collective action in addressing problems such as slavery, poverty, and the harms of industrialization. This ability to portray social problems and invoke change through fiction allowed many women writers to view their task as a spiritual calling, something that compelled them to put their moral beliefs and reform suggestions into an interesting style that could invoke change.

Although some belittled these successful women writers of the nineteenth century as merely “scribbling women” (Hawthorne 364), Rebecca Harding Davis believed that writing, for her, was a necessity, an artistic ability given to her that she had to utilize. In a letter written to her close friend Annie Fields in January of 1863, Davis states that writing was “necessary,” since “every animal has speech and that is mine” (Letter to Annie Fields). However, Davis did not settle for using this speech to merely present something for aesthetic pleasure or trivial entertainment. There was a deeper motive and purpose to writing, one centered on reforming the society in which she lived. In a 1904 autobiography, Davis herself insists that there are only two motives in which a writer would be influenced to put their ideas down on paper; either “to wring a living out of the public” or to “propose to reform it, with the fervor of the apostles and as firm a faith in their own genius as every martyr had in his God” (143). Davis further elaborated on this idea within the persuasive essays she published in various literary magazines. For example, in the 1891 essay “Women and Literature” Davis wrote: “A few women... will write... simply because there is in them a message to be given, and they cannot die until they have spoken it” (qtd. in Mock 129). In these ways, Davis presents the idea of



writers, especially women writers, having a message within them that must be shared for the betterment of society.

This idea of a writer with a moral message was even played out in the letters between Davis and her son, prolific writer Richard Harding Davis. Although these letters were never intended for publication, they too reveal Davis's reform-minded nature. In a letter written to Richard during his college years, Davis encourages him to "stop praying and go out and try to put your Christianity into real action by doing some kindness- even speaking in a friendly way to somebody." According to Davis, this type of action would revive a stagnant prayer life and provide thoughts that would "help you understand yourself and God" (Letter to Richard Harding Davis 17). With its clear emphasis on the benefits of actively helping others, this letter points to the reform-minded thinking that motivated Davis both personally and in her published work.

Out of this motivation to write, Rebecca Harding Davis produced her breakout work "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861), which was published ten short years after Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* validated the popularity and effectiveness of social fiction. Although Davis's "Life" was widely acclaimed during the time period in which it was written, it was largely forgotten until Tillie Olsen rediscovered the text and brought it back to the attention of modern literary critics and readers by republishing it in 1972. Even as the rediscovery of "Life" placed Davis within the American literary canon, the majority of her other works have been either harshly criticized or forgotten. Davis wrote over 500 texts within her literary career, many of which were published and reviewed in the top literary journals of the time period. Even though Davis, like many other reform writers, was admired for her passion, according to Lisa Long, she was often criticized for

compromising aesthetic form in favor of “excessive didacticism, religiosity, and/or sentimentality” (264).

For these reasons, Davis has typically been overlooked as a major figure in American literature, dismissed as simply “an early proponent of social reform fiction” (Long 264). In other discussions, she is valued merely as a sort of transitional bridge across which “American literary historians traverse, moving smoothly from the banks of Hawthorne’s romance and Stowe’s sentiment to the shores of Howells’s and James’s realism, Norris’s naturalism, and Twain’s regionalism” (Long 267). Although recognizing Davis’s importance within the context of American literature, this idea values her writings only for their ability to get from one canonical text to another. However, in closely looking at Davis’s works, both including and going beyond “Life in the Iron Mills,” it is evident that there is value in the form and subject matter of her writings apart from their role as transitional social reform texts.

This value is located in the link that Davis forges between art and reform. Instead of compromising art to expose the need for reform or focusing on aesthetics at the expense of reform, Davis focuses on the working-class artist figure, and thereby fuses the didactic language of reform with the aesthetic conversation of the time period. This focus separated her from contemporaries such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne, who often portrayed heroic, well-educated artists separated from their surroundings. Davis differs from established tradition, making her artists working-class members of society struggling to fulfill their artistic desire to create and be heard due to the obstacles of everyday life. In taking the artist off of the pedestal and placing him or her in an oppressive environment, Davis uses the plight of her artist characters both to reveal the

need for reform and to critique the ideology that prevents such reform. This is done by establishing the voice of the artist figure within her writing and then tragically silencing it. This treatment of voice further allows Davis to validate her *own* literary voice, using it to critique the ideology that silences her artist figures and threatens to silence her. In this way, Davis' use of the artist figure applies closely to personal life. During a time period in which female writers were often seen as merely "scribbling women," Davis refutes that title by using the plight of her artist to critique the very ideology that supports it. Therefore, Davis's recasting of the artist figure encourages not only a surface level institutional reform, but also a deep ideological reform that would enable Davis to more freely fulfill her desire as a female writer to create and be heard.

### **Part 3: Capitalism and the Failure of Voice in "Life in the Iron Mills"**

Davis begins her writing career by focusing on the artist figure in "Life in the Iron Mills." In this story, Davis introduces Hugh Wolfe and his cousin Deb, part of the "filthy" Welsh immigrant class who live a life of "incessant labor, sleeping in kennel-like rooms, eating rank pork and molasses, [and] drinking" (15). Although Hugh, like many Welsh immigrants, works long hours in an iron mill, mechanically filling a furnace with coal, there is something unique about him. According to the narrator, God had put into "this man's soul a fierce thirst for beauty,- to know it, to create it; to *be* – something, he knows not what,- other than he is" (25). With this character Davis defines what it means to be an artist. It is not the environment that makes Hugh an artist by inspiring him to create. Rather, it is a deep desire inside his very being, one that differentiates from the other workers whose "drunken faces and brains [were] full of unawakened power" (14).

Rejecting the transcendental belief that the aesthetic nature is separate from appetite and necessity, Davis describes Hugh as having a “thirst” and a “hunger” to create art. Hugh’s hunger sets him apart from both his fellow mill workers and the heroic, romantic artists of the time period.

Although Hugh possesses an innate desire for beauty, his environment confines him, forcing him to create art during the small amounts of free time at the mill and using the waste product of the iron he produces. He sculpts *korl*, the flesh-colored waxen leftovers of the metal, into “hideous, fantastic enough, but sometimes strangely beautiful” works of art (24). This description of his art as being both hideous and beautiful validates the uniqueness of the artist character Davis has created. Instead of depicting an upper class artist who makes aesthetically pleasing art during his leisure time, Davis places her artist in the middle of a degraded, industrial environment, and in doing so “calls on her readers to juxtapose two realms ordinarily kept separate in nineteenth-century culture: fine arts and heavy industry” (Tichi 293). In juxtaposing and then fusing these two realms, Davis is also redefining the work of art itself, for Hugh’s work is both a product and a reflection of the environment in which he works.

As a product of Hugh’s environment, this art is raw and realistic. For example, the *Korl* woman sculpture is of a nude body, crouching down with rigid muscles and a “wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf’s” (32). According to the narrator, her body is muscular and rough from labor and has “not one line of beauty or grace in it” (32). Here Davis reveals how the harsh conditions of the mill environment have influenced the physical bodies of the workers, and in turn influenced Hugh’s artistic portrayal of those workers. However, the environment influences more than the physical bodies of the

workers. It has also starved their souls, as witnessed by the “poignant longing” in the face of the Korl woman (32). The workers long for something else, something the oppressive environment has denied them. In fact, Hugh’s sculpting appears to be his way of using the left over waste of the system that oppresses him to deal with his own soul starvation. Unable to fulfill his desire for beauty in the midst of the “vile, slimy life” pushed upon him, Hugh constantly creates sculptures and destroys them in frustration (25). Although this art is intended to help him cope, it only reinforces his position as a factory laborer. According to Maribel Molyneaux, the continual cycle of creation and destruction only emphasizes Hugh’s “own vulnerability and expendability in the mill.” Hugh, like the korl, is the waste of the industrial economic system and can be easily destroyed and replaced within that system (Molyneaux 166). Both Hugh and his art are products of the oppressive environment; not even through his art can Hugh transcend his circumstances and achieve freedom from his own soul-starvation.

Because Hugh’s artwork is a product of the oppressive environment he cannot transcend, it embodies his raw yearning for freedom and his struggle to attain it. Although Hugh’s artwork, and the yearning it portrays, is hidden from society at large by its confinement in the mill, Davis creates an opportunity for men outside of Hugh’s social class to witness it. The mill overseer Clark Kirby, town physician Doctor May, and several other capitalist visitors take a tour of the mill to introduce their Northern friend Mitchell to Southern institutions. During this tour, they literally run in to one of Hugh’s sculptures, forcing them to confront both the art and artist that were previously hidden from their sight. According to Cecilia Tichi, the Korl Woman they are exposed to is comparable to the creative clay modeling of sculptors whose work had gained widespread

acclaim by upper class Americans during the time period (297). The visitors do not disregard the sculpture, but rather stand in evident awe of it, critically observing it as they would any other piece of sculpture. In fact, the sculpture is said to have strangely “touched” Mitchell (32). However, the rawness of the art “protests the romantic aesthetic” (Pfaelzer 42) that the visitors would have been accustomed to, an aesthetic made familiar by the clay modeling that the Korl Woman resembles. With this incident, the artwork is portrayed as being both familiar and unfamiliar to the visitors who are confronted with it. They are given a medium which they can relate to and observe with the same critical eye they would give the upper-class art they were accustomed to viewing. Although this allows the Korl Woman to at first appear familiar, its realistic and frank portrayal of a human body and soul obviously oppressed by life in the mills challenges the upper class notion that art should be made for aesthetic pleasure and separate from its environment.

Besides confirming Hugh and his artwork by giving it critical attention, the visitors are also made aware of the deep underlying purpose behind the artwork itself. It serves as an undeniable voice for both Hugh and the other factory workers who have been constantly silenced under the “vast machinery of system” that controls their lives (Harris 41). As “the unsleeping engines groan and shriek” (19), the noise of the factory environment denies the workers the basic human right of speech. They have to shout to be heard, and they mostly stay silent as they mechanically work to fulfill their task (26). In the context of the workers’ inability to vocalize, both to one another and to their upper class overseer, Hugh’s sculpture becomes an important means of displaying their inner life. This sculpture becomes their voice, depicting the deep hunger, the “poignant

longing” inside of them caused by menial labor and the conditions in which they perform that labor (32). Mitchell recognizes this anguish represented in the artwork and reveals it to his companions, stating that the Korl Woman “asks questions of God, and says ‘I have a right to know’” (34). This confession by Mitchell proves that he “could ignore the silenced workers around him, but he cannot ignore the question artfully carved into the Korl Woman’s face” (Harris 48). Therefore, Hugh’s sculpture has a purpose beyond that of beauty, allowing it to become more than just art for art’s sake or art for improving the individual.

Even though Davis is able to use Hugh’s artwork to give him an undeniable voice recognized by Mitchell and shared with the other visitors, she ultimately uses these visitors to enforce the American ideology of the time period in order to silence that voice. For example, although the Korl woman makes Mitchell and his companions aware of the soul starvation of the workers and their desires to be saved, they use capitalist ideology to justify their inaction. The mill overseer Kirby admits that there may be “stray gleams of mind and soul” among the workers, but asserts that it is not his job to foster their “infant geniuses” (34). His only responsibility is to pay them every Saturday night. It is then their own responsibility to use the capitalist system to advance themselves, since according to him it is “a ladder which any man can scale” (34). With this theory, Kirby reveals a common belief that all men, regardless of class status, have the ability and resources needed to advance themselves without needing others to create opportunities that help them along. In fact, Kirby states that “the Lord will take care of his own; or else they can work out their own salvation” (34). Supporting his theory of capitalism with religion, Kirby is able to justify his inaction and “wash [his] hands of all social problems” that are

in fact, the text suggests, created by capitalism (35). When confronted with the visitor's ideology, Hugh accepts it and views himself as having a "filthy body" and "more stained soul" in comparison to the visitors (30). This internalization of the visitors' ideology silences Hugh, turning him in to a "dumb, hopeless animal" who admires the refinement of the capitalists (30) and stammers a simple "I dunno" when asked questions about his art (33). When his art gives him an opportunity to vocalize his struggle as a factory worker, Hugh is silenced by the internalization of the ideology that the visitors both represent and adamantly proclaim.

Besides allowing capitalist beliefs to silence Hugh and justify their inaction, the visitors also refer to romantic ideas of transcendence through faith and inspiration. For example, Doctor May admits to praying for the workers and also offers Hugh friendly advice meant to answer the Korl woman's question "What shall we do to be saved?" (35). He tells the artist that "a man may make himself anything he chooses. God has given you stronger powers than many men,- me, for instance" (37). This aligns with the transcendentalist belief in the innate ability of man to improve himself in spite of circumstances. According to May, this task of perfecting oneself is even easier for Hugh, given his God given artist talents. For this reason, May only feels obliged to give Hugh some inspiring words concerning the perfectibility of man and religious faith. However, when Hugh asks for actual help and not just inspiring words, May reasons that it would be unfair to help one worker when there are "myriads" left suffering (37). This reasoning reveals that although May idealistically says one thing about suffering and oppression, he realistically believes another. In this scenario, Davis clearly presents as skewed the transcendental belief that merely "accurate information and correct seeing could renovate



the individual and, in turn, society” (Pfaelzer 44). May’s response reveals the discrepancy between the idealistic belief that self-transformation enables reform and the reality that concrete action is needed instead.

Davis not only refutes the American ideology that restricts Hugh’s artistic voice, but also portrays how that ideology has led to ineffective approaches to reform. After being exposed to the false ideology of “freedom,” Hugh stumbles into a church looking for answers. However, the pastor, who is a proclaimed Christian reformer, only reinforces the beliefs that the capitalist visitors offered Hugh. The narrator states that the preacher presented his sermon painting the “incarnate Life, Love, and universal Man” in such a way that the words “passed far over the furnace-tender’s grasp, toned to suit another class of culture; they sounded in his ears a very pleasant song in an unknown tongue” (49). Although the preacher aims to reform society, his words are not applicable to the very people that need to experience reform. Instead, they offer a false hope concerning the power of man to defeat sin, similar to the false hope instilled in Hugh by the words of Kirby and May. In this way, “the preacher’s message of Christian salvation, just like the capitalists’ language, is incomprehensible to the workers” (Harris 51). By drawing a connection between the visitors to the mill and the minister in their unwillingness and inability to establish concrete reform, Davis critiques the church establishment for its failure to implement change.

Although this critique of the church is evident in “Life in the Iron Mills,” Davis originally intended it to be a harsher one. According to Janice Lasseter, a paragraph alluding to the life of Jesus, who was for Davis the perfect example of a social reformer, was omitted from the original holograph by the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Davis

originally intended for the following paragraph to succeed her statement that the Christian minister had failed with regard to helping the “morbid, distorted heart of the Welsh puddler” (48):

Years ago, a mechanic tried reform in the alleys of a city as swarming and vile as this mill town, who did not fail. Could Wolfe have seen him as He was, that night, what then? A social Pariah, a man of the lowest caste, thrown up from among them, dying with their pain, starving with their hunger, tempted as they are to drink, to steal, to curse God and die. Theirs by blood, by birth. The son, they said, of Joseph the carpenter, his mother and sisters there among them. Terribly alone, one who loved and was not loved, and suffered from that pain; who dared to be pure and honest in that devil's den; who dared to die for us though he was a physical coward and feared death. If He had stood in the church that night, would not the wretch in the torn shirt there in the pew have "known the man"? His brother first. And then, unveiled his God. (Lasseter 176)

In this omitted paragraph, Davis draws a comparison between Jesus and Hugh, showing how both are lower class members of society. Like Hugh, Jesus was starving with hunger and suffering from pain. His knowledge of what it felt like to be a member of the lowest class, the passage suggests, enabled him to implement reform that “did not fail.” This differs greatly from the Christian minister, whom Davis describes in a paragraph of the published story as having “a steady eye that had never glared with hunger, and a hand that neither poverty nor strychnine-whiskey had taught to shake” (49). Therefore, even without the omitted paragraph, Davis is still able to portray the Christian minister as being similar to the mill visitors. But editorial interference keeps Davis from clearly

portraying Hugh as being similar to Christ. Although Davis boldly desires to draw that connection, calling Hugh and Jesus brothers in the omitted paragraph, her editor restricts it. In doing so, he softens Davis's critique of the church. This "veiling" of Davis's critique by a male editor is similar to the minister's "veiling" of the Christian message that is noticeable to the reader in spite of the omitted paragraph. The complicated language of the minister's sermon covers up the real meaning and message of Jesus, and in doing so keeps lower class members in the congregation from drawing a connection between themselves and Jesus. His language also prevents middle and upper class members of the congregation from reaching out to help those of the lower class. As stated by Lassester, the church had partnered with the merchant class by making "capitalism, materialism, prosperity, and complacency seem to be Christian virtues" (Lassester 180). These "Christian virtues" inhibit reform, further preventing Hugh from experiencing the freedom and satisfaction his soul desires.

By portraying how the church further implements the ideology that has already silenced Hugh, Davis is able to show the detrimental effects of that "silencing." For example, accepting the ideologies of capitalism and transcendentalism leads to Hugh's imprisonment, as he takes the money Deb stole from the visitors and insists that it is rightfully his. May's idea that God had given all people the ability to improve their existence is connected with the money, which Hugh views as created by God for "his children's use" (47). With this viewpoint, Hugh does not see taking the money as theft. However, he is sentenced to nineteen years of hard labor for it, a harsh sentence that will not be made any easier due to his artistic abilities. Instead of being able to "sculpt his own freedom," Hugh will be forbidden from sculpting all together (Pfaelzer 49). This

realization occurs as he stares longingly out his cell window and sees a beautiful mulatto girl who catches his eye. Seeing her, he desires to “try to-morrow, and cut one like it” (58). However, art will not be a part of his future in jail. This restriction from sculpting denies Hugh the only avenue he had for dealing with his own soul starvation and communicating that starvation through his artwork. In realizing that he can either choose death or silence, Hugh uses a piece of dull tin “not fit to cut korl with” (57) to slit his wrists and bleed to death. This death is tragic simply because Hugh should have had the “power of expression through art, the ‘language’ that can effect change” (Harris 48). However, Davis portrays the ways in which manipulative ideology was responsible for silencing the very artistic voice that should have been able to invoke change in those who heard it.

With this tragedy, Davis is calling for a profound reform that goes beyond surface level institutions to the very ideology that supports them. Hugh himself was a unique artist, having in his very nature a hunger to create meaningful artwork in the midst of an oppressive environment. This artwork gives him a voice and the opportunity to use that voice to represent the soul-starvation of his people and implement change. As Hugh’s artistic voice is silenced through his physical death, Davis makes it evident that ideology must be altered first before any effective institutional reform can occur. By portraying the life and death of such a unique artist, Davis challenges the very core of the American belief system, encouraging readers to change their ways of thinking and then act upon that change by reforming American institutions.

Even though Hugh’s artwork has the potential to be a voice of change, it is confined within a mill and then in the narrator’s library after his death. This confinement keeps

others from coming in to contact with it, preventing the artist's voice within the sculpture from being heard and invoking change. But Hugh's now silenced voice still has a message within it that needs to be heard, and in this need Davis fills the void by continuing to tell Hugh's story on his behalf. Therefore, Davis is able to step in and assert her own artistic voice, while at the same time validating her reason to write. As a woman writer during the time period, Davis needed a platform, one which she ultimately gains by becoming Hugh's voice. Without this void, Davis could find herself in a situation like Hugh's, as an artist with the desire and talent to create, but without the means necessary to do so because of the American ideology of the time period. Therefore, as Davis engages in the aesthetic debate in order to critique the ideology that silences an oppressed artist, she is also validating her own status as a woman writer. When Hugh's voice fails, Davis steps in to fill the void and tell his story, affirming herself as an artist as she does so.

#### **Part 4: The Ideology of "True Womanhood" and Its**

##### **Limitation on the Female Artist in "The Promise of Dawn"**

Written in 1863, the title of Davis's short story "The Promise of Dawn" actually comes from a phrase in the conclusion of "Life in the Iron Mills" in which the narrator describes the arm of the Korl Woman pointing to the East where "God has set the promise of Dawn" (65). Therefore, the title of the later story shows a continuation of the ideas and themes first presented in "Life in the Iron Mills." "Promise of Dawn" applies those ideas to gender and patriarchy; in this story, the oppressed female artist has even

less opportunity to be heard. This artist is Charlotte Tyndal, an orphan forced into prostitution in order to make a living for herself and her younger brother Benny. She is known in the community as “Devil Lot” (110), a name they validate by her cynical laugh and drunkenness. Like Hugh, Charlotte also has an artistic talent, with hers being the ability to sing. Here, then, the idea of artistic talent becoming a voice for the oppressed becomes to some extent literal: Charlotte’s voice can be physically heard. The connection is more evident and more daring, as prostitutes were hardly ever mentioned outright in reform writings (Fitts 124). Therefore, Charlotte’s ability to be both a prostitute and singer with artistic talent allows Davis to continue challenging ideas about the artist figure.

Charlotte enters in to a concert hall filled with “delicate, pure women” (101) and upper class gentlemen, boldly approaching its male manager in order to inquire about a place in the choir. A young lawyer convinces the manager to let her sing in order to hear her “curious” voice, one which the narrator describes as having low and soft tones that reveal her own chained soul (107). However, the men have no intention of employing Charlotte, instead making a spectacle of her by forcing her to sing and then threatening her with imprisonment if she does not leave the concert hall immediately. Upon this threat, Charlotte defiantly belts out a stanza of a hymn, which allows all the musical connoisseurs and critics to hear her unique voice. It is described as being “low, uncultured, yet full with childish grace and sparkle” (108). Therefore Charlotte, like Hugh, has a sense of rawness to her artistic voice, one that both reveals the hunger of her “chained” soul for freedom and frightens the upper classes with that hunger.

This scene within the concert hall is the only instance in which the reader encounters Charlotte's artistry. In the context of "Life in the Iron Mills," however, we can see Charlotte for the artist that Davis intended. Like Hugh, Charlotte has the raw talent needed to create something aesthetically appealing that both conforms to and challenges the aesthetic standards of the time period. She also has the hunger to perform her art in order to free herself from the bondage of her current existence. Lastly, this art gives her the opportunity to give voice to her desires in front of an upper class audience. For these reasons, Hugh and Charlotte can be seen as similar characters; both are oppressed artists who desire to create and be heard.

Although Charlotte is portrayed as an artist, because of her status as a lower class female and an orphaned prostitute, she is silenced to an even greater extent than Hugh. She is forced into her defiling occupation of prostitution in order to survive, but she is blamed for own defilement during a time period in which Americans strongly valued feminine purity. According to the dominant ideology of "True Womanhood," women were "designed exclusively for the roles of wife and mother and were expected to cultivate Piety, Purity, Submissiveness, and Domesticity in all their relations" (MacKethan). It became the role of the woman during the time period to remain pure until marriage, and then transform their home into a "moral sanctuary" in which their husbands and children were protected from the evils of the environment and instilled with Christian values (Fitts 116). This ideology revered pure, respectable women as the center of the domestic sphere and condemned those who that did not fit that standard. Although some women, such as Charlotte, did not have the means nor the protection to remain pure, they were held to the same standards of purity and seen as "immoral, undeserving,

[and] fatally flawed” (MacKethan). According to this ideology, there was no place for prostitutes like Charlotte within the community. Reflecting these views, in “The Promise of Dawn” community members try to keep Charlotte and her disgraceful condition hidden, quickly silencing her in the concert hall and denying her the sorts of encouraging words offered to Hugh by his upper class audience. Charlotte is further silenced by being threatened with imprisonment and thrown out on the street, an act which removes her from the public sphere that views her as defiled.

Because of Charlotte’s negative image in the community, she is denied the ability to use her singing talents to make “honest money” (106) and keep her little brother from “know[ing] what his sister was” (110). The degradation of the patriarchal society that demonizes her and denies her a voice is best seen through her conversation with Pumphrey, the concert hall manager who pursues Charlotte after she is refused a spot in the chorus and violently thrown out again on the streets. Pumphrey pities the young girl, especially since he himself has a young daughter who is of a similar age to her. Because of this connection, he appears to be a likely source of assistance for Charlotte. However, he hypocritically argues that the structure of the community’s social hierarchy keeps him from being able to help her. He reveals, “There’s no place for such as you. Those that have made you what you are hold good stations among us; but when a woman’s once down there’s no raising her up” (110-111). It becomes evident with this statement that the same people using Charlotte for her services are the ones accusing her of being defiled and keeping her from any honest work. Furthermore, Pumphrey is unwilling to help Charlotte out of personal fear that doing so will defile himself and his own family: “I’m a moral man,” he says, “I have to be careful of my reputation. Besides, I couldn’t bring you



under the same roof as my child” (109). Therefore, Pumphrey's knowledge of how society works, along with his own fears of tarnishing the purity of his reputation and his own home, keeps him from actively helping Charlotte assert her voice. Like Dr. May in “Life in the Iron Mills,” Pumphrey merely *acts* concerned, telling her to “try and lead a better life” yet doing nothing tangible to help her (111). In this incident, Davis presents the patriarchal ideology that leaves Charlotte voiceless and out of respectable work.

Not only do the ideas concerning male dominance and female purity keep a stranger such as Pumphrey from helping Charlotte, but they also keep her very own family members from coming to her rescue. “The Promise of Dawn” does not begin with a depiction of Charlotte, but rather with one of Adam Craig as he hobbles through the streets on his way home. Only later does the reader learn the connection between Adam and Charlotte. Adam is the twin brother of Charlotte’s deceased mother Ellen Myers, nicknamed “Nelly,” who was found dead on the docks of the city (105). Although the newspapers said that she died from starvation and whiskey, the reader is left to believe that Nelly killed herself to escape her situation. This incident constantly haunts Adam, who believes he failed in his responsibility as a brother to help protect his sister from prostitution and poverty. However, that sense of responsibility does not extend to helping his niece Charlotte and nephew Benny escape the same situation. Instead, Adam is more worried about protecting his own wife’s purity, and therefore unwilling to reach out a helping hand to the “polluted” Lot (102). He buys in to the ideas of “true womanhood” and his role as protector of his wife’s piety and purity. For example, when crossing paths with Lot on the street he vows not to tell his wife about Lot or that there were “such things in this world.” He desires to protect how “pure and saintly she was, his little wife!

A homely little body, but with the cleanest, most loving heart, doing her Master's will humbly" (102).

The hypocrisy Davis portrays within the male-enforced "Cult of True Womanhood" is further heightened as the reader learns that Adam had once taken care of orphans within the city. In fact, his wife Jinny was one of the orphans under his care, and his marriage to her produces a young child similar in age to Benny. This knowledge of Adam's past makes his own moral degradation more obvious: he refuses to make a connection between his past experience and current responsibility to Charlotte, Benny, and other orphans whose situations closely resemble his own wife's past. When Charlotte goes to his house on Christmas Eve and begs for him to take both her and her brother in for the night, he coldheartedly puts her back on the street telling her "there's no hope for such as you" (116). With this action, even Charlotte's own uncle fails in his responsibility to listen to her pleading voice and help her out of a desperate situation similar to her mother Nelly's.

Besides portraying the blatant problems within the ideology and lack of action of men such as Pumphrey and Adam, Davis also uses Charlotte's story to critique the failures of the Christian church in a way similar to "Life in the Iron Mills." The entire story takes place on Christmas Eve. The hope and joy associated with Jesus' birth is not, however, extended to Charlotte because the Christians around her fail to emulate his life. For example, Charlotte points out the failure of the church when she asks Pumphrey "Do teachers and them as sits in the grand churches come into our dens to teach us better?" (110). This lack of action on the part of church members is also seen by Jinny, the orphan wife of Adam, who should have been able to personally empathize with Charlotte but

who refuses to help. According to the narrator, the kind of religion she was taught at church “did not provide for anomalies of work” such as taking care of the prostitute Lot, who was “neither a Sioux nor a Rebel” (115). Therefore, both the church institution itself and the message it proclaims have utterly failed in encouraging its members to hear and help people like Charlotte.

Davis then points out the ideology that has justified the church in its inaction. For example, a Baptist preacher visits Adam in his home, allowing Adam to share with him stories about raising orphans who had a “hungry gnawing within them for something nearer than brother and sister” (99). But the preacher is more worried about Adam’s viewpoints on theology than on his reforming work as a father-figure to orphans. For this reason, Adam critiques the church for being full of “wrangling’ creeds” and bigotry that allow church members to think highly of themselves as Christ’s body while viewing everyone else as outsiders. After this critique, the preacher refuses to come back and visit Adam, instead preaching to his congregation “the prevalence of Tom Paine’s opinions on the lower class” (100). This incident in the beginning of the story, which occurs before the audience has even met Lot, reveals the church’s failure to implement the concrete reform that would improve the lives of those who needed it most. Instead of asking how he can help the orphans that Adam once took care of, the preacher asks theological questions about issues such as baptism. Although he clearly believes that these issues are the main concern of the church, they are not applicable to the lives of starving children who need food and protection. This skewed thinking is only made worse as the preacher gives a sermon based on the ideas of Thomas Paine instead of the actions of Jesus Christ. Paine’s belief concerning the importance of common sense in improving one’s social

status helped to justify the idea that poverty was the result of one's own moral failings. Therefore, it is the individual's responsibility to live rightly in order to break free from his or her position as a lower class member of society (Fitts 116). This reasoning allowed middle and upper class Americans to blame the poor for their lowly status, justifying inaction with regard to helping the poor and oppressed such as Charlotte. The irony of the situation is that Adam, the same person critiquing the religious ideology that prevents the institutional reform needed to help orphans, later allows patriarchal ideology to keep him from helping the orphaned Charlotte. In these ways, both patriarchal and religious ideology have prevented the reform needed to help Charlotte assert her voice and improve her lowly condition.

Having failed to assert her voice in the midst of oppressive ideology, Charlotte resorts to suicide in order to "free her brother from the downward cycle of poverty and debasement that she had inherited from her mother" (Harris 56). Benny, being an innocent male child undefiled in the eyes of a patriarchal community, is able to move in with Adam and his family after his sister's death. However, in killing herself to break the vicious cycle of oppression, Charlotte destroys the possibility that her voice could represent those who are in her same situation. For example, in the conversation with Pumphrey in which he admits to being sorry for Charlotte, she sharply asks "Why?... There's more like me. Fifteen thousand in the city of New York... I'm no better than the rest" (109). Although Charlotte's declaration exposes a truth hidden or ignored within the community, Pumphrey is not affected by this knowledge. It does not change his thinking or actions, and the reader does not see him share the knowledge with any other characters. Therefore, Charlotte's death is not redemptive, but rather keeps others from

hearing what she desperately needs them to. Her story cannot bring about change for herself and others if it stops with her death. But this discontinuation of Charlotte's story seems imminent as the only person able to step in and speak up on her behalf is her younger brother Benny, whose ignorance over her situation as a prostitute makes that action highly unlikely. Upon Charlotte's death and due to Benny's ignorance, there is no one left to speak up on her behalf and tell of her struggle to assert her voice in the midst of an oppressive society, a struggle which countless others experienced during the time period.

In order to speak up on Charlotte's behalf and make her death a redemptive one by invoking change, Davis empowers herself with the narrative authority of writing Charlotte's story. As Pumphrey and Adam Craig walk away from Charlotte's story, preventing it from influencing their words and actions, Davis picks up her pen and offers the "plain, coarse words [that] were the last cry for help from a drowning soul, going down into the depths whereof no voice has come back to tell the tale" (115).

Furthermore, in empowering herself with her own message to tell, she is able to reveal the need to reform the very ideology that would keep her silent, the patriarchal ideology of female domesticity. Therefore, Davis is able to extend upon the framework of her first story to enable a critique of something even more relevant to her own personal life, the issue of asserting the voice of the female artist in contrast to the ideology of domesticity. Although this critique extends off the optimism of a promise of change first alluded to in the conclusion of "Life in the Iron Mills," Charlotte's struggle allows for no hints of optimism. She is silenced to an even greater extent than Hugh, left without someone to speak on her behalf or a piece of artwork, like Hugh's *Korl Woman*, that will continue to

tell her story. In this way, the optimism hinted at in the conclusion of Hugh's struggle to assert himself as an oppressed male artist is not incorporated in to Charlotte's similar struggle, portraying the necessity of the ideological reform Davis undertakes in order to empower herself and other female artists.

### **Part 5: Using Artistic Voice to Critique the Patriarchal Male Editor-Female Writer Relationship in "Marcia"**

Davis continues her critique of patriarchy and its effect on the female artist in "Marcia," a short story published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1876. This story focuses on a Southern woman who desires to become a published writer, therefore portraying an artist whose work more closely resembles Davis's own. Like Hugh and Charlotte, Marcia has a hunger to create and be heard. Even though women during the time period were often silenced under the patriarchal demands to get married, establish a household, and ultimately raise a family, Marcia is empowered with a "message to be given" that she hungers for others to hear. She is not dependent "on her pen for support," but instead moves from Mississippi to Philadelphia by herself in order to have an opportunity to produce writings that could "assist in the Progress of humanity" (270). With this motivation, Marcia enlists the narrator of the story, who is also a newspaper editor, to help her publish her work. The editor reads several of the stories, praising them for uniqueness and originality. Instead of imitating the writing style of others, Marcia "painted over and over again her own home on the Yazoo," with its sunshine, swamps and semi-tropical forests, creating "a picture which remained in the mind strong and vivid

as one of Gérome's deserts or Hardy's moors" (273). This description of Marcia's writings allows Davis's readers to envision the beauty of the art that Marcia desires to create. However, the readers are never given the opportunity to read any of Marcia's writings. This maneuver becomes a strategic one that allows Davis's audience to better understand the power of the male editor in distributing a writer's work.

In fact, the power of the male editor is alluded to at the very beginning of the story when he admits that he receives thousands of packages each year containing the writings of desperate females. Whether they are from "the sickly daughter of a poor family" or the "wife of a drunken husband," each package of writings and their notes pleading for publication reveal "a woman's cry" for help (269). However, the editor often chooses not to open the packages in order to avoid hearing "how many tragedies there are in our street or under our own roof which will be none the better for our handling" (270). Although he admits that this is selfish, he has the agency to avoid hearing about the problems of women by choosing what he does and does not read. This control puts the female writer at his mercy. In fact, he admits that he did not open the letter he received from Marcia. It is not until she physically goes to visit his publishing office that he is forced to read over her writings.

This type of male control of literary publication would have been something very familiar to Davis by the time she published "Marcia" in 1876. In dealing with publishers for over 15 years, she struggled with this issue quite frequently. Sharon Harris argues that this paternalistic "publisher-author relationship" had an effect on Davis's writings, since editors "wielded [power] over an author, not only in terms of acceptance of materials but also in the content of the author's fiction and in shaping (and sometimes denigrating) an

individual's artistic vision" (Harris 17). We see an example of such power in the omission of the sharply critical paragraph from "Life in the Iron Mills." According to Lasseter, it is uncertain whether or not Davis knew about the omission of the paragraph beforehand. However, even if she was aware of the omission, it was certainly made without her approval. Her dissatisfaction at the altering of her works was evident in a letter Davis wrote to her editor James Fields in May 1862, which instructed him to "leave nothing out" in order not to deform the text (Lasseter 5). Nevertheless, Davis's work was still subjected to editorial interference. For example, Fields refused to publish Davis' first novel, *Margret Howth*, due to its realistic ending, causing Davis to rewrite a happier ending and in doing so detract from "the story's outrage and dramatization of social problems" (Lasseter 5). By the time Davis wrote a short story concerning the plight of a female writer, then, she was well aware of the control male editors had over a woman writer's message.

Although Marcia's art is at the mercy of the male publisher, Davis is able to use his critique of the artwork to reveal the patriarchal ideology of the time period that needed to be reformed. For example, after remarking on the beauty of Marcia's art, the newspaper editor also points out its evident technical flaws, flaws that result from Marcia's lack of formal education. The editor states:

The spelling was atrocious, the errors of grammar in every line beyond remedy.

The lowest pupil in our public schools would have detected her ignorance on the first page. There was, too, in all that she said or wrote an occasional gross indecency, such as a child might show: her life on the plantation explained it" (273).



The lack in Marcia's education revealed by the editor is then enforced by Marcia's own description of the environment in which she grew up. Marcia states that while living in Yazoo, she was "the only white child on a poor plantation" (271). She only received the minimal education that her mother, who had only two years of learning under a governess, could give her. Furthermore, Marcia's family had "no books nor newspapers, except the occasional copy of a magazine sent to us by friends in the North" (271). This lack of access to literature and education is evident to the editor through Marcia's writings, causing him to face the tragedy of a Southern writer that could easily be hidden from a Northern editor.

However, this lack of formal education is portrayed as not only a Southern issue, but also a gendered one. Marcia's family was under the control of a husband who limited both his wife and daughter's freedom. For example, Marcia's father believes that women are "only useful to bring forth children" (271) and therefore keeps his wife from fulfilling any desires she has apart from motherhood. This is a shame, as Marcia describes her mother as having a desire for artistic beauty and "one of the finest minds in the world" (271). However, "she never was twenty miles from the plantation; she has read nothing, knows nothing" (271). According to Marcia, the tension of having a brilliant mind and being confined to a restricting lifestyle has caused her mother to go mad. She resorts to snuff and opium as her only form of escape, and later in the story we learn that her drug use has caused her to become "no better than a walkin' corpse" (276). As with "The Promise of Dawn," these descriptions allow Davis to reveal how the ideology of "true womanhood" has detrimental effects on women such as Marcia's mother. By allowing his critique to lead to Marcia's bleak portrayal of life back home, Davis uses the male

editor to reveal the gender-based problems of society that deny Marcia and her mother the freedom and education needed to become artists. In this way, Davis challenges the paternalistic publisher-author relationship, using that relationship within her story to empower a voice that is usually silenced by it. Marcia is able to speak up even though her writings are never published by the editor, showing how Davis is manipulating the situation so that the paternalistic control of the editor does not silence the female artist completely, but rather works to her advantage in revealing the problems she, and more generally all female writers, faced in the postbellum South.

Although Marcia desires to circumvent male dominance in the literary realm and publish her writings, the suppression of her artistic voice further reveals the plight of the female writer. For example, Marcia moves to Philadelphia to pursue a career writing fiction but is only able to publish writings on trivial issues such as a description of dresses or a brief advertisement of an upcoming play (276). These limitations reveal that Marcia's writing career is confined to the domestic sphere, showing the way in which ideas concerning "true womanhood" keep Marcia from becoming the writer she desires to be. With these limitations, she must resort to supporting herself through sewing men's socks, another domestic job seen as acceptable work for women (272). When the editor worries about Marcia and offers her financial aid, she comforts him by stating, "I shall not starve. When the time has come for me to know that I have failed, I can go back to my own country and live like the other women there" (274). Although Marcia makes this statement to comfort the editor, she tries to avoid returning to the plantation at all costs. Later in the story, the plantation overseer Zack Byron travels to Philadelphia on "business" in order to "bring Marcia home and marry her" (276). According to Biron, he

has always wanted Marcia and aims to fulfill that desire by stalking her throughout the city in order to put an end to her escape. However, Marcia is always cautious of him following her, avoiding him by moving around frequently and going out the side doors of publishing offices when she spots him nearby. Therefore, the dominance displayed by male publishers and the plantation overseer are always a threatening and oppressive presence throughout the story, one that Marcia works hard, but unsuccessfully, to avoid.

Although Marcia reaches near starvation and resorts to stealing in order to avoid the oppression of her plantation home, her escape ultimately ends in defeat. She is imprisoned at the Central Station for theft and consumes a poisonous substance while there in order to secure her only option of permanent escape through death. However, she is revived and released into the care of Biron, who possessively states that once she is nursed back to health “she’ll come home to her own now, thank God, and be done with rubbishy book makers. Mrs. Biron will live like a lady” (279). With this move, Biron believes Marcia will be healed of the hunger that her doctor states left only “a feeble flicker of life” in her (279). However, as in “Life in the Iron Mills” and “Promise of Dawn,” Marcia’s “hunger” is not just a physical one. She too has the innate spiritual hunger to create and be heard that characterizes Davis’s artist figures. This hunger is seen throughout the story, as when Marcia states that “I have something to say, if people only would hear it” (277). However with her final defeat, she loses both the identity of her own voice and any chance of fulfilling her deep artistic desire to be heard.

In light of Marcia’s defeat and transformation into Mrs. Biron, Davis’s readers are left with an overall feeling of uneasiness. Marcia returns to her editor’s office two or three weeks later, dressed magnificently in “silk and plumes, the costliest her owner’s

money could buy” (279). Although her clothes make her look “magnificent,” Marcia’s face is pale and she looks no one in the eyes as she states that she “shall not return to Philadelphia. I have no wish to return” (279). Furthermore, Marcia refuses to allow the editor to mail any books or papers to the plantation. She even hands him her entire black satchel of manuscripts with the request that he burn every one. Here it seems as if Marcia has accepted her defeat as both a female artist and an independent woman. However, the fact that Biron is standing over her shoulder during the entire conversation makes Marcia’s comments seem forced and insincere, offered not in her own voice but rather that of her new “owner’s.” In being unable to escape the problems of an ideology that denies her education and establishes the role she must fulfill as a Southern woman, Marcia is silenced. Her yearnings to produce art are left unfulfilled.

In these ways, Marcia’s story enables Davis to develop her theme of oppressed artists so that it becomes applicable to her own life as a woman writer. Like Hugh and Charlotte, Marcia has the innate desire to be an artist despite living in an oppressive environment. But unlike Hugh and Charlotte, Marcia’s role as a writer aligns with Davis’s, allowing for a more specific critique of the exact ideology that would have restricted Davis’ own artistic voice. She is able to portray the ways in which the paternalistic roles of both the men within families and the male editors within the literary world ultimately defeat Marcia’s artistic voice. Although this defeat is seemingly inevitable, Davis is able to manipulate the story in order to use the very people oppressing Marcia to tell Marcia’s story. The male editor and overseer Biron are agents of patriarchal ideology, aiming to keep Marcia’s artistic voice restrained in the domestic sphere. The editor never publishes any of her writings and Biron pursues her in order to

bring her back to her plantation home. However, Davis exerts control over the situation, using the voice of these male agents to tell Marcia's tragic story. In doing so, Davis reveals the patriarchal ideology that could suppress her own artistic voice, in a way similar to Marcia's, and aims to reform it.

### **Part 6: Davis's Use of the Voiceless Artist to Assert Her Own Literary Voice**

In conclusion, Davis's "message to be given" actually takes the form of critiquing the ideology of the time period in order to empower her own artistic voice. Naomi Sofer asserts that all women writers of the nineteenth century were faced with this dilemma; the woman writer's status as artist puts her "in conflict with her own culture, which defined woman and artist as mutually exclusive" (31). According to the ideology of domesticity, women's place was in the home, providing a moral environment for herself and her family. However, Davis desired to break away from that domestic sphere. She desired to write and be heard, and in order to fulfill those desires had to find a way to authorize her own artistic voice while at the same time critiquing any ideology that would restrict it. This need fuelled a literary technique in which Davis focused on working-class oppressed artist figures, depicting them in a way that opposed the romantic and transcendental treatment of them in the writings of Davis's predecessors and contemporaries. This redefined artist figure was portrayed as having an innate hunger to create, negating any transcendental belief that the aesthetic element within each human being should be detached from appetite and not utilized out of necessity. These artists *must* create their art in order to vocalize the injustice that oppresses them and hopefully escape from such

oppression. Although each artist's voice is heard through their work by upper class members of society, each voice is ultimately silenced by the upper class ideology that the artwork protests. The ultimate spiritual death of each artist through suicide and marriage is tragic, especially since artists were thought to have the ability to invoke change. However, the tragic endings allow for an even greater critique of the capitalistic and patriarchal ideology that caused them.

Furthermore, the tragic death of each artist leads to a failure of voice. Since these characters are unable to use their art to vocalize their own story of sorrow and oppression, Davis can step in and fill that void, empowering herself with a "message to be given." This message associates Davis with the popular reform movements and social novels of the time period, since it evidently critiques the American ideology used to justify oppressive institutions such as the factory mills or the Christian church. However, her message moves beyond the realm of general reform and applies directly to her own status as an artist. It enables her to establish herself as a female writer, a difficult task due to the paternalistic male editor-female writer relationship. But Davis uses that relationship to her advantage, publishing the tragic tales of oppressed artist figures to critique the ideology that has the power to alter her voice or silence it altogether. Although this use of the artist figure is at first not evident in her portrayal of a male sculptor in "Life in the Iron Mills," it eventually becomes more clear as she develops her theme to focus on the female artist and then more specifically on the female writer in "Marcia." In this regard, viewing the progression of Davis' work as a writer, instead of focusing merely on her breakout work "Life in the Iron Mills," enables readers to view her as more than just a woman writing for reform who happened to be on the forefront of American literary

realism. Instead, she becomes an insightful female writer who was aware of the ideology and institutions that sought to silence her literary voice and who reconfigured the artist figure in such a way as to assert her voice in spite of them.

## Works Cited

- Adkins, Nelson F. "Emerson and the Bardic Tradition" *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 63.2 (1948): 662-677.
- "The American Novel . Literary Timeline | PBS." *PBS: Public Broadcasting Service*. Web. 24 Feb. 2011.
- Davis, Rebecca Harding. *Bits of Gossip*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin &, 1904. Print
- *Life in the Iron Mills, and Other Stories*. Ed. Tillie Olsen. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist, 1985. Print.
- Letter to Annie Fields. Jan. 1863. MS.
- Letter to Richard Harding Davis. *Adventures and Letters of Richard Harding Davis*. New York: Scribner's, 1917. 16-18. Print.
- "Marcia." *Silhouettes of American Life*. Vol. 9. New York: Garrett, 1968. 269-80. Print.
- "The Promise of Dawn: A Christmas Story." *Rebecca Harding Davis's Stories of the Civil War Era: Selected Writings from the Borderlands*. Ed. Sharon M. Harris and Robin L. Cadwallader. Athens: University of Georgia, 2010. 95-121. Print.
- Fitts, Robert. "The Rhetoric of Reform: The Five Points Missions and the Cult of Domesticity." *Historical Archaeology* 35.3 (2001): 115-32. JSTOR. Web. 20 Feb. 2012.
- Gilmore, Paul. "Mechanical Means: Emersonian Aesthetic Transcendence and." *Modern Language Quarterly* 65.2 (2004): 245-68. Project MUSE. Web
- Gougeon, Len. *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform*. Athens: University of Georgia, 2010. Print
- Harris, Sharon. *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. Letter to George D. Ticknor. 19 Jan. 1855. *Life in the Iron Mills*.



- Boston: Bedford, 1998. 363-64. Print.
- Karcher, Carolyn L. "Reconceiving 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature: The Challenge of Women Writers." *American Literature* 66.2 (1994) 781-794.
- Koch, Donald A. "The Roots of American Reform Literature." *Popular Literature in America: A Symposium in Honor of Lyon N. Richardson*. 159-170. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State Univ. Popular P, 1972. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web. 17 Mar. 2011
- Lasseter, Janice M. "The Censored and Uncensored Literary Lives of Life in the Iron Mills." *Legacy* 20 (2003): 175-90. *JSTOR*. University of Nebraska Press. Web
- Long, Lisa A. "Rebecca Harding Davis and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps." *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-century American Women's Writing*. By Dale M. Bauer and Philip Gould. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 262-83. Print.
- MacKethan, Lucinda. "The Cult of Domesticity." *America in Class*. National Humanities Center. Web. 19 Mar. 2012. <<http://americainclass.org/19c/the-cult-of-domesticity/>>.
- Miller, Donald L. "The Coming of Civil War." *A Biography of America*. WGBH Educational Foundation. Web. 18 Mar. 2012.
- Mock, Michele L. "'An Ardor That Was Human, and a Power That Was Art': Rebecca Harding Davis and the Art of the Periodical." *The Only Efficient Instrument: American Women Writers and the Periodical, 1837-1916*. Ed. Aleta F. Cane and Susan Alves. Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2001. 126-42. Print
- Molyneaux, Maribel W. "Sculpture in the Iron Mills: Rebecca Harding Davis's Korl Woman." *Women's Studies* 17.3 (1990): 157-77. Web
- Newberry, Frederick. "The Artist of the Beautiful: Crossing the Transcendent Divide in Hawthorne's Fiction." *Nineteenth Century Literature* 50.1 (1995): 78-96. *JSTOR*.

- Pfaelzer, Jean. "The Terrible Question of "Life in the Iron Mills." *Parlor Radical: Rebecca Harding Davis and the Origins of American Social Realism*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 1996. 24-53. Print.
- "Society for the Study of Rebecca Harding Davis and Her World." Web. 24 Feb. 2011. <<http://scotus.francis.edu/rebeccahardingdavis/>>.
- Sofer, Naomi Z. "Carry[ing] a Yankee Girl to Glory." *American Literature* 75.1 (2003): 31- 60. Project MUSE. Web.
- Tichi, Cecelia. "Art and Artists." *Life in the Iron Mills*. By Rebecca Harding Davis. Boston: Bedford, 1998. 293-99. Print.
- Williams, Susan S. "'Promoting an Extensive Sale': The Production and Reception of The Lamplighter." *The New England Quarterly* 69.2 (1996): 179-200. Print
- Yeager, Diane M. "Art for Humanity's Sake: The Social Novel as a Mode of Moral Discourse." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.3 (2005): 445-483.